

52. Motu

Contributors:

Introduction: *Thomas E. Dutton*

Wordlist: *Andrew Taylor*

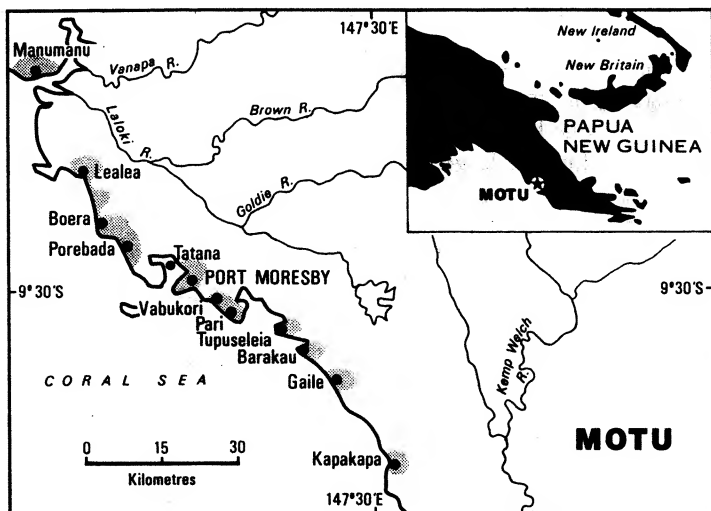
1. Introduction

Motu is the Austronesian language spoken around Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea. It is spoken natively by an estimated 14,000 villagers who inhabit maritime villages spread out along the coast between Kapakapa (or Gabagaba) in the east and Galley Reach in the west, a distance of approximately one hundred and twenty kilometres (Wurm – Hattori 1981: map 9). Excluding the large village complex of Hanuabada situated in Port Moresby itself there are eleven Motu villages. Culturally and socially these villages are generally regarded as belonging to two sections or tribes, the Eastern Motu and the Western Motu, the former inhabiting the area east of Bootless Inlet and the latter the area west of it. This division also reflects dialectal differences although two of the Western villages, Tatana and Vabukori, are sufficiently different from the others to suggest that they probably ought to be regarded as a third dialect or as two closely related other dialects (Taylor 1970a: 1). At a higher level Motu is a member of the Proto Central Papuan sub-group of Papuan Tip Cluster languages and is most closely related to Gabadi and other Austronesian languages immediately to the west and thence to Sinagoro and Keapara immediately to the east (Ross 1988: 190-194).

Inland the Motu are bounded by speakers of languages of the non-Austronesian Koiarian family and to the east speakers of languages of the Kwalean family (Wurm – Hattori 1981: map 9). Of these the Motu were, at the time Europeans arrived, in closest contact with the Koiarian Koita and Koiari who inhabit areas approximately coterminous with the Western and Eastern Motu sections respectively.

At the time of first contact the Western Motu were engaged in long distance trading to the Gulf of Papua in annual trading cycles known in the literature as *hiri*. On these voyages they traded pots and other locally produced items for sago and other Gulf products. During these visits the Motu and their trade partners communicated in at least two different trade languages which were pidginised or simplified forms of the non-Austronesian

languages spoken by their trade partners. In addition to these two trade languages the Motu appear to have used a simplified form of their own language for communicating with those coming to visit them in their own villages. Following the establishment of the colony of British New Guinea in 1888 a form of Motu similar in many ways to this simplified Motu, and most probably based on it, became the lingua franca of the first official police force of the colony and eventually the unofficial language of administration in the colony, and subsequent Territory, of Papua. Because of its association with the police force this language became known as Police Motu, a name it kept until 1970 when its name was changed to Hiri Motu (Dutton 1985).



Map 52. Motu language area

Motu was the first language to be studied and used for literacy purposes in Papua New Guinea. In 1872 a number of Polynesian teachers were landed at Manumanu village by the London Missionary Society to begin work amongst them. Following the deaths of a number of these teachers, however, the mission was moved to Elevala, a section of the now large village complex of Hanuabada, in Port Moresby when the first European missionary, Dr W.G. Lawes, and family arrived to take charge of the mission in 1874. Lawes immediately set about learning Motu and producing literacy materials in it. His first book was called *Bukana Kunana: Levaleva Tuahia Adipaia* and contained reading lessons, some Bible translations and Bible

stories and hymns. Since then there have been many publications in and about the language (particularly by Lawes 1885, Lister-Turner 1913, Lister-Turner and Clark 1930, and Taylor 1970a) and most Motu are literate in their language. Many are also literate in English since primary, and more recently, secondary and tertiary, education in English has been available to them for many years. This contact with English, and Western culture generally, has had its effects on the culture and language of the Motu. These effects are most noticeable in the vocabulary of present-day Motu.

Because of the central geographical position occupied by the Motu, the widespread trading contacts they had established up and down the coast before Europeans arrived to settle in their midst, the diversity of languages spoken in the area, and the fact that Motu became the first language to be reduced to writing in the area, Motu naturally became the lingua franca of the London Missionary Society (Taylor 1977). This has helped in turn to establish prestige for the language and ensure its survival.

The most detailed study of Motu is to be found in Taylor (1970a) although Lawes' and Lister-Turner and Clark's various grammars and dictionaries are important supplementary works which contain much valuable historical information and descriptions of aspects of the language not covered by Taylor (1970a). Ethnographic notes on the Motu are to be found in Belshaw (1957), Groves (1954, 1960), Lawes (1879) and Taylor (1968).